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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000461

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: PRT TIKRIT: TRIBAL SHEIKHS SEE USG AS OCCUPYING
ALLY RATHER THAN INVADERS TO EXPEL

REF: BAGHDAD 220

Classified By: PRT Leader Stephanie Miley; Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) This is a PRT Tikrit, Salah ad Din cable.

12. (C) SUMMARY. To discuss President Bush's "New Way Forward in Iraq" and to promote tribal leaders' role in countering al Qaeda (AQIZ) in the wake of the kidnapping of leading tribal authority Sheikh Ahmad "Naji" Ajbarah al Jabouri (reftel), the PRT hosted a Sheikhs' Council meeting on January 25. Through the course of the discussion covering debaathification reform, Constitutional amendments, and reconciliation efforts, it became clear that Salah ad Din's tribal sheikhs are beginning to see the USG/Coalition Forces (CF) as occupying allies rather than invaders who must be expelled. Although their newfound support is nascent, trust is growing in the USG as the most effective interlocutor with the central GOI and best protection against AQIZ and the perceived threat of Shia militias. While support for the USG may be waxing in the province, much work remains to bridge the gap between the province and the central GOI. END SUMMARY.

A SHEIKHS' MEETING CONVENES

13. (SBU) Per the request of the PRT, the Salah ad Din (SaD) Sheikhs' Council convened on January 25 with PRT officials, SaD Deputy Governor Abdullah Ajbarah, and more than 25 tribal sheikhs from throughout the province in attendance. One notable absence was Council President Sheikh Ahmad "Naji" Ajbarah al Jabouri who was kidnapped by AQIZ affiliates on January 8 (reftel). The goal of the meeting was to discuss President Bush's "New Way Forward in Iraq" and to garner support from tribal authorities in countering AQIZ in the wake of Sheikh Naji's kidnapping.

Discussing the "New Way Forward"

14. (SBU) After the PRT Leader's brief outline and explanation of President Bush's new strategy in Iraq, many sheikhs welcomed the new security initiatives, especially with regard to securing Baghdad and limiting the role of militias, but questioned the GOI's ability to follow through. Summing up the comments of others, one sheikh said, "The country needs strong leadership to rescue it from its current crisis." After Sheikh Naji's kidnapping, many confessed they personally do not feel secure even as leaders in their communities and bemoaned the fact that they cannot travel safely to Baghdad or to other areas in Iraq. Many also reiterated the need to combat what they perceived are

Iran-backed militias, with one sheikh declaring, "if the CF fights Jaysh al Mahdi and Badr Corps, then we are with you."

Debaathification, the Constitution, and Reconciliation

15. (SBU) Turning to other issues of import to Sunnis, many sheikhs called for reform in debaathification and the Constitution, insisting that the residents of SaD have been disproportionately affected because of their former ties to the Baath Party. They indicated that if the GOI were serious about reconciliation, it would make strides to see that a "new page is started where forgiveness is shown at every level." A number of sheikhs expressed mistrust of what they perceive to be a "Shia-controlled, Iran-influenced" central GOI that is uninterested in Sunni concerns and the central GOI's intentions and connections with Iran.

A Call for Greater Support for the USG/CF

15. (SBU) In a discussion initiated by the Deputy Governor, several sheikhs agreed that they had greater trust in the USG/CF's intentions to develop a free and democratic Iraq. The Deputy Governor said that without the PRT/CF's support, the province would have no entry to or interaction with the central GOI. He detailed support he and the Governor had received on previous trips to Baghdad and expressed gratitude for assistance in transporting Saddam's remains to the province. He called for the residents of the province to work with the PRT/CF, as they were the fairest guardians of

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the province's success. Several sheikhs agreed with the Deputy Governor's comments and expressed gratitude to the USG participants for actions supporting the interests of the province's residents.

16. (C) After the meeting, the Deputy Governor remarked that the sheikhs had made significant advancement in their public statements in support of the CF. During the meeting when the Deputy Governor discussed the USG's reported role in transporting Saddam's remains back to the province for burial, one prominent sheikh stood and bowed, stretching out his hand and offering a blessing. The Deputy Governor said that the significance of this important gesture should not be underestimated, as it demonstrates a great sign of respect for the USG.

Comment

17. (C) In contrast to previous meetings, the sheikhs were more positive about the USG/CF's role in Iraq. Although the province's tribal sheikhs' newfound support is nascent, trust is growing in the USG as the most effective interlocutor with the central GOI and the best protection against AQIZ and the perceived threat of Shia militias. As AQIZ continues to try to expand its influence in SaD, we are hopeful that our continued engagement with tribal and provincial government leaders on topics that interest them will lead to greater support of USG initiatives, improved security, and boldness in fighting AQIZ. Much needs to be done to bridge the gap between Salah ad Din and the central GOI, including continued outreach to keep the province's elected and traditional leaders engaged in narrowing this gap. END COMMENT.

18. (U) For additional reporting from PRT Tikrit, Salah ad Din, please see our SIPRNET Reporting Blog:
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Tikrit>.

KHALILZAD